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‘Why Was He Videoing Us?’: The ethics and politics of audio-visual propaganda in child trafficking and human trafficking campaigns

Sam Okyere, Nana K Agyeman, and Emmanuel Saboro

Abstract

This paper is a critical reflection on the ethical and political issues associated with the creation and dissemination of unsettling images and videos for child trafficking and human trafficking abolitionist campaigns. The paper acknowledges efforts by anti-trafficking campaigners to address accusations of poverty porn, stigmatisation, and sensationalism directed at such visual propaganda. However, it also observes that these remedial measures have had very little impact. Anti-child trafficking and anti-human trafficking campaigns are still dominated by sensational spectacles of victimhood, abjection, pain, and suffering. The paper attributes this inertia to campaigners’ fears that radical deviation from the use of emotive or ‘biting’ visuals may undermine their established narratives, campaign goals, and even credibility. It supports this conclusion using path dependence theory and the findings of research with residents of remote island communities on the Lake Volta in Ghana who have been the focus of extensive anti-child-trafficking raids and campaigns over the last decade.

Keywords: Volta, Ghana, International Justice Mission, child trafficking, abolitionist

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Introduction

As we got close to the shore, two speed boats dashed at us through the fog, almost capsizing our canoe. The occupants were armed, and they said they were the police. They pointed their guns at us and said I am under arrest for working with children on the lake. They told my children to get into their boats. We were all petrified. The children were screaming and clinging tightly on to me to avoid being taken. I tried to explain to them [the police] that these were my own children and we had gone to catch fish to feed our family, but one of them hit me for not complying with their order. They snatched my children into one boat, pushed me into the other and took us away. They put me in the police cells for three days, after which they let me go without charge. But it has been almost a year now and I do not know what has happened to my stolen children. (Kwame, Akakpo Island).

Since 2015, the NGO International Justice Mission (IJM) has partnered with the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU) of the Ghana Police Service and other government agencies to conduct anti-child trafficking raids across the remote island communities on the Lake Volta in Ghana. The quote above is an extract from our interview with Kwame, a father who was recounting how three of his children were, in his words, ‘stolen’ by the AHTU and IJM when they raided his community, Akakpo, and three other islands, Anakpokpo, Kpala, and Gasoekope, in 2017. The AHTU and IJM removed a total of 144 children from the four islands under the suspicion that they were victims of trafficking or ‘modern slavery’. However, investigations that went on for nearly a year produced a much different reality to the suspicion that all these children had been rescued from ‘traffickers’ or ‘slave masters’. As reported by the Member of Parliament for the islands, the investigations found that all but four of the children had been wrongly snatched from their families.¹ Besides the violent nature of the supposed rescue, the children had also been subjected to the trauma of being detained for nearly a year during which they were denied contact with their families.

This egregious outcome notwithstanding, the IJM and AHTU have persisted with the raids. As can be seen on its webpages and elsewhere on the internet, images and video footage captured during the raids and those of allegedly rescued children form a central plank of the IJM’s anti-child trafficking advocacy

¹ ‘MP Refutes CNN Documentary on Child Slavery’, Stop Illegal Fishing, 6 March 2019, retrieved 10 January 2021, <https://stopillegalfishing.com/press-links/mp-refutes-cnn-documentary-on-child-slavery>.

and fundraising initiatives.² The creation and use of such controversial audio-visual materials for campaigns, fundraising, and other advocacy is a widespread and long-standing practice in the anti-trafficking and humanitarian fields. Selling human misery and suffering is one of the primary currency earners for humanitarian organisations, as Kennedy puts it.³ In the child trafficking context, it is justified as a means of speaking for victims who supposedly lack the voice, agency, and capacity to speak for themselves.⁴

However, this visual propaganda also raises intractable moral, political, and ethical concerns. It has been denounced as degrading, distortions of reality, needlessly melodramatic, commodification of suffering and epistemically violent.⁵ Anti-trafficking and humanitarian campaigners have duly acknowledged these concerns and articulated various remedies in response. These include the

² '31 Free After Largest IJM Ghana Rescue to Date', International Justice Mission, 28 April 2017, <https://www.ijm.org/news/31-free-after-largest-ijm-ghana-rescue-to-date>; '24 Boys Rescued on Lake Volta', International Justice Mission, 13 February 2017, <https://youtu.be/gYW3bfyKtkA>.

³ D Kennedy, 'Selling the Distant Other: Humanitarianism and imagery-ethical dilemmas of humanitarian action', *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, vol. 28, 2009, pp. 1–25, <https://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/411>.

⁴ 'Trade of Innocents: Film captures reality of child trafficking for sexual exploitation', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 28 September 2012, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2012/September/trade-of-innocents_-film-captures-reality-of-child-trafficking-for-sexual-exploitation.html; H R Evans, 'From the Voices of Domestic Sex Trafficking Survivors: Experiences of complex trauma & posttraumatic growth', Doctorate in Social Work Dissertations, University of Pennsylvania, 2019, https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations_sp2/126.

⁵ L P Beutin, 'Black Suffering for/from Anti-Trafficking Advocacy', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 9, 2017, pp. 14–30, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121792>; M Lim and M Moufahim, 'The Spectacularization of Suffering: An analysis of the use of celebrities in "Comic Relief" UK's charity fundraising campaigns', *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 31, no. 5–6, 2015, pp. 525–545, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2015.1020330>; J Repo and R Yrjölä, 'The Gender Politics of Celebrity Humanitarianism in Africa', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 44–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2011.534661>; T R Müller, 'The Long Shadow of Band Aid Humanitarianism: Revisiting the dynamics between famine and celebrity', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2013, pp. 470–484, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.785342>.

adoption of ethical codes to guide campaigns,⁶ commitments to the use of less problematic images,⁷ and the elicitation of ‘survivor voice’ to guide campaigns.⁸ Yet, child trafficking and human trafficking prevention and abolitionist campaigns are still largely dominated by spectacles of abjection, victimhood, pain, and suffering. Indeed, even in instances where more measured images and videos are used, the themes of pain and suffering are retained through selective representations that provide narrow understandings of complex issues and may thus misinform. What accounts for this inertia?

This paper examines this question drawing on findings of research conducted with residents of the raided islands and anti-trafficking NGO staff. Using the participants’ accounts and a path dependence theoretical framework,⁹ the paper argues that the lack of change results from the fact that organisations such as the IJM are hemmed-in by their established campaign messages and strategies. The inertia arises from the concern that audiences who have been (de)sensitised through prolonged exposure to melodramatic visuals of victimisation, pain, and suffering may not respond in the same way to less ‘biting’ or ‘gripping’ images and narratives. Sensationalism and shock thus prevail because they are seen as easier routes to successful awareness-raising, fundraising, and other goals compared to careful analyses of the complexities surrounding children’s work and mobility. The paper concludes that this logic and the raids to which it contributes have to be tackled to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the rights issues facing the remote islands and other marginalised communities that are the focus of anti-trafficking campaigns.

⁶ United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, *Guide to Ethics and Human Rights in Counter-Trafficking: Ethical standards for counter-trafficking research and programming*, Bangkok, September 2008, <http://un-act.org/publication/view/guide-ethics-human-rights-counter-trafficking>; L Rende Taylor and M Latonero, *Updated Guide to Ethics & Human Rights in Anti-Human Trafficking: Ethical standards and approaches for working with migrant workers and trafficked persons in the digital age*, Issara Institute, Bangkok, 2018, <https://respect.international/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Updated-Guide-to-Ethics-and-Human-Rights-in-Anti-Trafficking-Ethical-Standards-for-Working-with-Migrant-Workers-and-Trafficked-Persons-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>.

⁷ E Brady, *Photographing Modern Slavery: Recommendations for responsible practice*, University of Nottingham Rights Lab, December 2019, <https://pagasa.be/medias/ressourcepublicationitem/31/file/eng/photographing-modern-slavery.pdf>.

⁸ A White, *Media and Trafficking in Human Beings Guidelines*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna, 2017, https://www.icmpd.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Media_and_THB_Guidelines_EN_WEB.pdf.

⁹ W Arthur, *Increasing Returns and Path Dependence in the Economy*, University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 1994.

Literature Review

The creation and dissemination of unsettling images and videos have become ubiquitous in child trafficking advocacy since adoption of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (ILO C182) and the UN Trafficking Protocol in 1999 and 2000, respectively. This trend firstly reflects campaigners' desire to harness the power of audio-visual propaganda to simplify or sidestep debates on the thorny political, economic, and socio-cultural issues surrounding trafficking.¹⁰ Secondly, such controversial campaigns are seen as a means of showing the realities of child trafficking and human trafficking to audiences.¹¹ They are deemed to 'confer reality status' or lend credibility and urgency to situations that might otherwise be deemed unbelievable.¹² The third reason is funding. Faced with growing competition for attention and funding, sensational representations of allegedly trafficked, exploited, and abused children are deployed in an attempt to shock audiences into attention and hopefully loosen their purse strings in turn.¹³

In the child trafficking context, this mode of campaigning serves important ideological functions related to normative ideas about children and childhood.¹⁴ Images and videos of allegedly victimised, abjected, and disempowered children conveniently reinforce notions of children's innocence, naivety, and supposed

¹⁰ E Krsmanovic, 'Captured "Realities" of Human Trafficking: Analysis of photographs illustrating stories on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian media', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 139–160 <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121778>, R Bleiker and E Hutchison, 'Fear No More: Emotions and world politics', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 34, 2008, pp. 115–135, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210508007821>.

¹¹ S Hepburn and R Simon, *Human Trafficking Around the World: Hidden in plain sight*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013; A Lewnes (ed.), *Child Trafficking in Europe: A broad vision to put children first*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008, retrieved 17 September 2020, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ct_in_europe_full.pdf; A Gearon, 'How Trafficked Children Are Being Hidden Behind a Focus on Modern Slavery', *The Conversation*, 19 January 2018, <https://theconversation.com/how-trafficked-children-are-being-hidden-behind-a-focus-on-modern-slavery-87116>.

¹² Kennedy.

¹³ J Lentfer, 'Yes, Charities Want To Make An Impact. But poverty porn is not the way to do it', *The Guardian*, 12 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2018/jan/12/charities-stop-poverty-porn-fundraising-ed-sheeran-comic-relief>.

¹⁴ E de Bruijn and L T Murphy, 'Trading in Innocence: Slave-shaming in Ghanaian children's market fiction', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 30, issue 3, 2018, pp. 243–262, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2017.1321982>.

lack of capacity to speak up for themselves.¹⁵ As the NGO Humanium states in an anti-child trafficking campaign featuring images of children in chains and tears, this presentation gives ‘voice to voiceless children...young lives unaware of their own rights and unknowingly sold for their bodies like oil or a Persian commodity off the side of a crowded Sunday bazaar’.¹⁶ Additionally, in media and popular culture, children’s images and videos are typically used to elicit or denote joy, innocence, and happiness.¹⁷ The use of disturbing images of allegedly trafficked, abused, and suffering children is intended to upend these romantic visions and convey messages about lost and broken childhoods in need of rescue.¹⁸

These controversial representations have been roundly criticised. Across the wider humanitarian field, campaigns featuring images of children or others in deplorable and abjected states are castigated as typecast representations and stereotypes which produce stigma and discrimination.¹⁹ Those featuring black and brown children from the Global South who have supposedly been trafficked and abused by their own relatives and communities and instead rescued by a (often white Global North) benefactor have also been criticised for reinforcing harmful tropes about the supposed ‘sorry’ and ‘uncivilised’ state of non-white communities in need of white ‘benevolence’, ‘civilisation’, or ‘salvation’.²⁰ Holly also argues that images and films can ‘talk’ to their consumers in ways that can be radically different to

¹⁵ M Wilson and E O’Brien, ‘Constructing the Ideal Victim in the United States of America’s Annual Trafficking in Persons Reports’, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2016, pp. 29–45, p. 42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-015-9600-8>.

¹⁶ O Soret, ‘Child Trafficking in India: Give voice to the voiceless’, Humanium, 5 April 2018, <https://www.humanium.org/en/child-trafficking-in-india>.

¹⁷ V B Cvetkovic and D C Olson (eds.), *Portrayals of Children in Popular Culture: Fleeting image*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2012.

¹⁸ J Nathanson, ‘The Pornography of Poverty: Reframing the discourse of international aid’s representations of starving children’, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2013, pp. 103–120, p. 103, <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2013v38n1a2587>.

¹⁹ M Dolinar and P Sitar, ‘The Use of Stereotypical Images of Africa in Fundraising Campaigns’, *European Scientific Journal*, vol. 9, no. 11, 2013, pp. 20–32, <https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/view/965>.

²⁰ D Zane, ‘Barbie Challenges the “White Saviour Complex”’, *BBC*, 1 May 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36132482>; J Schaffer, ‘Poverty Porn: Do the means justify the ends?’, *Nonprofit Quarterly*, 10 June 2016, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/poverty-porn-do-the-means-justify-the-ends/>; L Murdoch, ‘“Poverty Porn” and “Pity Charity” the Dark Underbelly of a Cambodia Orphanage’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June 2016, retrieved 23 March 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/poverty-porn-and-pity-charity-the-dark-underbelly-of-a-cambodia-orphanage-20160602-gpacf4.html>.

those intended by their makers.²¹ Hence, jarring scenes intended to simplify or sidestep the complex social, economic, and political questions around childhood, children's work, and mobility can instead confuse and convey simplistic, erroneous and even harmful understandings and responses.

Some of these concerns have emerged from within the anti-trafficking sector itself, leading to a range of remedial measures over the past decade. Numerous anti-trafficking campaigners, scholars, activists, and other stakeholders have advocated for the adoption of ethical codes of conduct to guide campaigns, a shift towards the use of less unsettling images and videos, and the inclusion of 'survivor voice' in campaign development and dissemination.²² Organisations such as Save the Children, for example, increasingly avoid using actual images of children for their child trafficking campaigns, opting instead for cartoon abstracts, illustrations, and silhouettes. However, the impact of these remedial measures has thus far been underwhelming because anti-trafficking campaigns still largely seek to attract attention, funding, and other support through motifs and themes of pain and suffering. Hence, despite using children's silhouettes in place of real images, Save the Children's videos state '...you won't see their faces, but you will hear their stories and feel their pain'.²³

The ethical questions and slow remedial rate are probably most acute in campaigns featuring images and videos taken during trafficking raids. These representations provoke serious questions about consent, anonymity, and dignity given the often clandestine, oppressive, and violent conditions under which they were produced. The legitimacy of capturing videos and pictures in anti-trafficking raids is defended by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Ghana as a means of securing evidence for prosecuting alleged perpetrators.²⁴ Yet, the many documentary films and campaigns featuring such media show that their primary function is emotional sensationalism rather than legal redress. In some instances, instead of alleged perpetrators, video and pictures of allegedly rescued

²¹ M A Holly, *Past Looking: Historical imagination and the rhetoric of the image*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996, p. 11.

²² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for the GCC Region, *Human Trafficking Toolkit for Journalists*, United Nations, 2017, retrieved 16 September 2020, https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2018/Toolkit_HT_Final_Book_Finish_2017_English_comp.pdf; Taylor and Latonero.

²³ 'Child Trafficking in Bolivia', Save the Children, 1 August 2016, retrieved 15 September 2020, <https://youtu.be/WhpLYrKWpMo>; 'These Are the Voices of Child Trafficking', Save the Children, 2 July 2018, <https://youtu.be/g0nO6hfk9Q>.

²⁴ IOM Ghana, *Standard Operating Procedures to Combat Human Trafficking in Ghana with an Emphasis on Child Trafficking*, IOM Ghana, October 2017, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/sop_ghana.pdf.

children are used with the justification that ‘survivor voice’ or representation is also crucial for anti-trafficking advocacy.²⁵ Some take the utilitarian view that there is no problem if ‘survivors’ willingly consent to be presented as objects of pity for awareness-raising, fundraising, and other anti-trafficking advocacy.²⁶ Yet, what may be instrumentally convenient may not necessarily be ethical.

The issue is not simply whether ‘survivors’ agree to be presented as objects of degradation and misery, but whether their consent is genuine and voluntary when their access to food, shelter, and other support is often contingent on accepting the ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’ label or cooperating with the narratives and expectations of their ‘rescuers’. ‘Survivor’ voice can merely serve as a fig leaf for rubber-stamping the preferred modalities of ‘rescuers’ in such cases where inducements are involved.²⁷ Furthermore, genuine voluntary informed consent is arguably not possible when people are unaware that the ways in which they are portrayed feeds into practices and discourses that cause harm, or the benefits they envisage from accepting to be presented in this way may not, in fact, materialise. This is clearly borne out by evidence that children who were presented as having been rescued from trafficking or slavery in fishing communities on the Lake Volta have ‘re-trafficked themselves’ back to their supposed former ‘slave masters’ upon realising that the promises of education, food, money, and other benefits by their ‘rescuers’ will not materialise.²⁸

²⁵ Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants, *Hear Their Voices. Act to Protect. – Testimonies by victims of human trafficking from around the world*, October 2017, https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/GLO-ACT/GLOACT_Victim-Testimonies_October_2017.pdf; H-R Murray, *Voices: Ideas for using survivor testimony in antislavery work*, University of Nottingham Rights Lab, October 2019, <https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1336/voices-ideas-for-using-survivor-testimony-in-antislavery-work.pdf>; A R Sandrolini, ‘The Story of a Survivor of Child Sex Trafficking’, The Exodus Road, 12 April 2019, <https://blog.theexodusroad.com/kelly-dore-story-of-survivor-of-child-sex-trafficking>.

²⁶ S Warrington with J Crombie, *The People in the Pictures: Vital perspectives on Save the Children’s image making*, Save the Children, 2017, p. xi, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12425/pdf/the_people_in_the_pictures.pdf.

²⁷ D Brennan and S Plambech, ‘Editorial: Moving Forward— Life after trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218101>; E Shih, ‘Freedom Markets: Consumption and commerce across human-trafficking rescue in Thailand’, *Positions*, vol. 25, issue 4, 2017, pp. 769–794, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-4188410>.

²⁸ H K Golo and I Eshun, “‘Re-trafficking’ in the Coastal Communities and the Volta Lake of Ghana: Children’s rights, agency and intra-household bargaining position”, *American Journal of Business and Society*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2019, pp. 97–107.

In the next section of the paper, which presents the Lake Volta research, we argue that the meaningful resolution of these complex issues of representation, rights, (un)freedom and social justice requires a shift from the low-hanging fruits of sensationalism and melodrama in favour of accounts that deal with the complex social, economic, political, and cultural factors surrounding children's work and labour mobility.

Research Context and Methods

This paper is based on field research conducted in July 2018 in Gasokope, Akakpo, Anakpokpo and Kpala, four remote island communities located on the Volta Lake in Ghana. The lake, which is the largest human-made reservoir in the world, was formed between 1961 and 1965, when around 3,000 square miles of land were flooded for construction of the Akosombo hydro-electric dam. Per the accounts of elders during the fieldwork, during this period, residents of some affected communities who were engaged in fishing moved to coastal Ghana and other locations where they could continue this work. Following the dam's construction, some resettled on the dozens of islands that had formed on the lake. These returnees were joined by coastal fishermen and others looking to take advantage of the bountiful catfish, perch, tilapia, and other species that were now thriving in the lake's warm waters. All aspects of life in these island and riverine communities revolve around the lake. It is the residents' main livelihood source, marketplace, social and recreational ground, and highway to other islands.

Over the years, depleting fish stocks, deforestation, and climate change have resulted in marked deprivation across the islands. The islanders' socio-economic hardship is also linked to their exclusion from government social welfare, infrastructure, and development programmes owing to their geographical remoteness. All four islands involved in this study have no electricity, roads, hospitals, potable water, or other basic infrastructure and services. Against this backdrop, families deem it crucial to teach their children fishing skills to support household subsistence and guarantee their children's self-sufficiency in adulthood. Much respect and honour is also associated with the ability to subsist independently through work on the lake and the land. Adults who lack such abilities are sometimes ridiculed even where they have other income sources. Families typically introduce their children to fishing once they are able to swim, with their tasks based on their maturity, gender, and experience. Boys are usually expected to watch over the canoe during fishing and help with mending, casting, and retrieving nets under adults' supervision. Girls are typically involved in processing and selling the catch.

As Okyere has detailed elsewhere, the last decade has witnessed intensive efforts by domestic and foreign anti-trafficking organisations such as IJM, Free

the Slaves (FTS), Challenging Heights, and others to address such forms of children's work on the lake as child exploitation, child trafficking, and child slavery.²⁹ They claim that thousands of children have been bought for nothing at all or for as little as USD 20 in Ghanaian coastal areas such as Winneba and trafficked to the islands where they are forced to labour for nearly 15 hours daily, with no chance of escape.³⁰ These harrowing accounts and portrayals of 'child slavery' and 'trafficking' on Ghana's Volta Lake have attracted significant international attention, including documentary films and reports by the BBC,³¹ the Guardian,³² and CNN.³³

We do not dispute the possibility that children's work in these communities can be exploitative and abusive. The many documented cases of egregious child exploitation in schools,³⁴ care homes,³⁵ the church,³⁶ and even within NGOs

²⁹ S Okyere, "'Shock and Awe': A critique of the Ghana-centric child trafficking discourse', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 9, 2017, pp. 92–105, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121797>.

³⁰ G Freduah, 'Poverty Mitigation and Wealth Creation Through Artisanal Fisheries in Dzemeni Area at Volta Lake, Ghana', Master of Philosophy Degree in Resources and Human Adaptations, Department of Geography, The University of Bergen, Norway, 2008, p. 83, <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/1956/3051>; J Fisher, 'New Research Indicates High Prevalence of Child Trafficking and Slavery-Like Conditions in Ghana Fishing Villages', *Free the Slaves*, 28 February 2017, retrieved 23 March 2021, <http://www.freetheslaves.net/new-research-indicates-high-prevalence-of-child-trafficking-and-slavery-like-conditions-in-ghana-fishing-villages>.

³¹ Y Hakim, 'Ghana's Child Labourers', *BBC World News*, 3 February 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3ct0bxx>.

³² J Snell, 'Paradise Lost: The dark secrets of Ghana's Lake Volta – in pictures', *The Guardian*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2020/dec/15/paradise-lost-dark-secrets-ghana-lake-volta-child-labour-in-pictures>.

³³ L Coorlim, 'Child Slaves Risk Their Lives on Ghana's Lake Volta', *CNN*, February 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/africa/ghana-child-slaves-intl/>.

³⁴ H Siddique, 'Child Sexual Abuse in Schools Often an Open Secret, Says Inquiry', *The Guardian*, 17 December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/17/child-sexual-abuse-in-schools-often-an-open-secret-says-inquiry>.

³⁵ Y Roberts, "'We Were Abused Every Day.' Decades on, children's homes victims wait for justice', *The Guardian*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/08/care-home-victims-wait-for-justice-decades-on-institutional-child-abuse>.

³⁶ O Bowcott and H Sherwood, 'Child Sexual Abuse in Catholic Church "Swept Under the Carpet", Inquiry Finds', *The Guardian*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/10/child-sexual-abuse-in-catholic-church-swept-under-the-carpet-inquiry-finds>.

purportedly seeking to rescue abused children³⁷ teach us that child victimisation can occur even under seemingly benevolent or benign conditions. However, we maintain that there are serious questions about the narratives and scale of the problems reported given that there has been no independent large-scale survey or studies to test the veracity of these claims. Much of what is known about the issue is drawn from small scale studies conducted by the NGOs for their advocacy. There are more serious questions still about the appropriateness of the ‘child catching’ raids that have become one of the main responses to the issue.

The main objective of our study was to explore these raids of which there has been no research, legal, or other scrutiny to date. The study was especially interested in the islanders’ experiences and views, noting their marked exclusion from NGO and media accounts of the raids and children’s work on their islands. These dominant representations are characterised by stories of good versus evil in which the NGOs and media present the islanders as malicious child traffickers, enslavers, and exploiters on one hand and cast themselves as benevolent agents seeking to save trafficked and enslaved children let down by their own parents, families and communities on the other.³⁸ The study was therefore firstly interested in the islanders’ views on this representation. Secondly, it wanted to elicit and amplify the islanders’ experiences of, and views on, the raids and the overarching accusations of pervasive child trafficking and enslavement levelled at their communities.

We employed a qualitative sequential multi-method research design with the rationale that using more than one method would offer different but complementary data that could provide a more profound understanding of the issues.³⁹ In practical terms, we started with a community-wide meeting on Gasokope island and focus group discussions on Akakpo, Anakpokpo, and Kpala islands to explore the residents’ opinions on the research topic. Following these group meetings, we conducted eighteen in-depth qualitative interviews with families of children who were taken during the raids, traditional leaders, and

³⁷ R Freedman, ‘NGOs Need to Step up and Keep Children Safe – here’s what they can do’, *The Conversation*, 13 February 2018, <https://theconversation.com/ngos-need-to-step-up-and-keep-children-safe-heres-what-they-can-do-91722>; A Macleod, ‘When It Comes to Child Sex Abuse in Aid Work, the Oxfam Revelations Are Just the Tip of the Iceberg’, *Independent*, 10 February 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/oxfam-aid-work-prostitutes-un-workers-child-sex-abuse-harassment-dfid-a8204526.html>.

³⁸ L Branham, ‘The Deep Place’, International Justice Mission, 16 November 2017, <https://vimeo.com/243189898>.

³⁹ J M Morse, ‘Approaches to Qualitative-Quantitative Methodological Triangulation’, *Nursing Research*, vol. 40, issue 2, 1991, pp. 120–123, p. 122, <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006199-199103000-00014>.

elected political representatives. We also conducted five interviews with staff of anti-trafficking organisations, primarily to explore with them the islanders' views on their operations. We were unable to secure an interview with staff of IJM for this study, but Challenging Heights, Free the Slaves, and Engage Now Africa accepted our interview invitations.

Findings

The interview and group meetings' data were analysed thematically following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke.⁴⁰ A more detailed account of the raids and their aftermath is discussed in a forthcoming paper by the authors. Due to word count limitations and to maintain the paper's central focus, we present two thematic findings related to the capture and use of visual materials for anti-trafficking advocacy: *the white man with the camera* and *the politics of representation*.

The White Man with the Camera

An issue about which the islanders expressed immense disquiet was the presence of 'the white man with the camera'. They were referring to a white IJM staff member who was with the raiding party. The IJM states that staff accompany local police in a supporting role during rescue operations.⁴¹ However, the islanders were adamant that the 'white man with the camera' was more than an observer. They insisted that he was directing the police to take their children, brothers, grandchildren, and relatives while calmly recording the ensuing violence and dehumanisation.

We all saw him. He [the white man] was in the other speed boat with a camera telling them what to do and recording them [the police] taking my son from me. I shouted at him to stop pointing it [camera] at me, but the police hit me. (John, father, Gasoko)

As we were nearing the shore, I saw the white man with the camera. He was pointing something at us. Later, they [other islanders] told us it was a camera. He pointed it at us all the time, even when my brother was crying as the men with guns took him away. (Kwame, brother, Kpala)

⁴⁰ V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2006, pp. 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

⁴¹ 'Slavery Still Exists', International Justice Mission, 2021, retrieved 23 March 2021, <https://www.ijm.org/our-work>.

They [police] came with the white man with the camera to steal our children. He was in another boat watching everything with his camera. Why was he doing this? (Kobla, grandfather, Akakpo)

Throughout the interviews and group meetings, the islanders repeatedly pondered why the white man was recording them. The persistence of this point drew our attention to the fact that they were completely unaware of the use of such videos for anti-trafficking propaganda by the IJM and other NGOs. The islands' lack of electricity, televisions, computers, and access to the internet, coupled with their remoteness, meant that none had seen any of these videos before. We therefore showed them some of the videos on the IJM and CNN websites and elsewhere on the internet using our laptops. Their responses to the videos ranged from incredulity to distress and anger. As Ablah, a grandmother on Kpala island lamented, the videos added insult to the injury of their brutalisation and the theft of their children:

First, they come to beat us, steal our children and leave us in fear. Now we find out they have also been using the videos to disgrace us.

Abu, the leader of Akakpo island, also complained that the videos wildly exaggerated the nature of children's involvement in fishing in their communities, while completely omitting the violence visited on his community by the AHTU and IJM raiding parties.

Watching this film, I can see that they [anti-trafficking campaigns] don't talk about how they came to beat my people. Some run into the bushes in fear and didn't come back for days. Nobody in the videos talks about this, except their lies that we buy children and force them to work for us. I can swear before any deity that we do not live the way they [NGOs] are saying in these videos. I have six children and I also raised three of my sister's children who were sent to live with me here. I taught them all how to work on the lake and they are also teaching their children because that's how we all take care of ourselves here. They [IJM and police] refuse to understand us. They took three of my grandchildren away and I am in deep pain.

In sum, the islanders were firstly angered at being recorded without their consent during the raids. They then also contested the credibility of the anti-child trafficking campaigns and documentary films for which the recordings had been used. They were adamant that these were distortions of children's socialisation and work in their communities. As we discuss next under the second theme, *the politics of representation*, they felt that it was possible to raise concerns about their children's lives and work without raiding their islands or using materials which indiscriminately stigmatised them.

The Politics of Representation

Much as the islanders defended the permissibility, desirability, and appropriateness of children's work on the lake, they also acknowledged that it can be challenging and even perilous for very young children and those who cannot swim. Many noted that they would like their children to attend school and attain other skills in addition to fishing, such that they could seek opportunities outside the islands if need be. However, as Alex, a parent, exclaimed, schools and other opportunities were non-existent on their marginalised islands: *'They arrested me for being on the lake with my sons instead of taking them to school, but where is the school?'* Akakpo and Anakpokpo islands have never had schools while Gasoekope's was destroyed by rainfall at the time of the fieldwork. Kpala island had a school building with six classrooms, three of which were structurally unsafe at the time of the fieldwork. A fatal accident was narrowly avoided barely a month earlier, when one of the walls collapsed while pupils were playing outside during their lunch time. Consequently, all pupils from classes 1–6 concurrently use the remaining three classrooms. To further compound matters, the entire school had only two untrained volunteer teachers. Qualified teachers posted to Kpala and the other remote islands refuse to travel to these duty stations because of the islands' remoteness and the lack of infrastructure and opportunities for career and social mobility.

The islanders questioned why these pressing educational and developmental needs, which in part inform their children's work on the lake, do not feature in the anti-trafficking campaigns and documentary films. We saw this as a reflection of media and anti-trafficking campaigners' continued preference for sensationalism and simplistic stories of good versus evil over engagement with the complex social, economic, and political issues that often lie behind children's insecurities. For the islanders, however, there was more to this omission. As this quote from our interview with Mary, a mother on Akakpo island, shows, they saw it as a deliberate measure to justify raiding their islands to capture their children: *'Why don't they [IJM and police] come and help us build our schools or support us to cater for our children if they say they care about them? Can they care more about our children than us? They say these things [claims of child trafficking and slavery on the islands] so that they can come to take our children from us.'*

Given the strength of their belief in this assertion and feelings that the campaigns were distortions of children's work in the communities, we asked Mary and others to propose alternative images to be used for a campaign on the subject. They asked us to take photos of their crumbling school block to explain why their children go to fish instead of attending school. They also asked us to take photos of their torn fishing nets, broken baskets, and dilapidated homes to convey to the outside world that their children were not victims of trafficking and slavery, but victims of socio-economic deprivation and lack of opportunities. As Ama,

a mother on Anakpokpo island, told us: *'If we had enough money, we would even send our children away to stay with my sister at Hoboe for education instead of fishing with us here. But our canoe is always leaking, we need new nets, and we can't catch enough fish. We are on our own here, no help from anywhere.'*



Image 1. Front of school block on Kpala Island. Photo taken by researchers during fieldwork in 2018.



Image 2. The remaining three classrooms on Kpala Island used by all pupils from classes 1–6 and exposed to the elements. Photo taken by researchers during fieldwork in 2018.



Image 3. A household from which five children were taken during the raids. Photo taken by researchers during fieldwork in 2018.



Image 4. Fishing nets in need of mending or replacement. Photo taken by researchers during fieldwork in 2018.



Image 5. A participant's house. Photo taken by researchers during fieldwork in 2018.



Image 6. A participant's house. Photo taken by researchers during fieldwork in 2018.

In response to such arguments, some argue that poverty and structural hardships do not justify children's harmful labour.⁴² The question of whether children's fishing activities with their families on the islands are harmful and exploitative is not the main focus of this paper; neither is it seeking to trivialise or idealise children's precarious labour. However, even if claims that children's work on the island is harmful are valid, we found the islanders' accounts equally persuasive if not more so. They showed that, while structural conditions such as poverty and marginalisation are key determinants for their children's work on the lake (harmful or otherwise), these causal factors are trivialised or not addressed by anti-trafficking advocates. When we raised this issue in our interviews with the NGO staff, they were similarly sympathetic to it. Yet, even as they acknowledged the problematic nature of the raids and portrayal of the islanders, they expressed scepticism as to whether a step change in their sector was going to occur any time soon. As one candidly explained, raids and their related campaigns are also driven by funding considerations, which may not be met by focusing on socio-economic factors as demanded by the islanders:

We are concerned about children's rights, but the issue needs funding. Donors want to see results, and sometimes it takes raiding the communities to attain the numbers and get the images needed to touch the hearts of donors. It is all about funding in the end. How much they [an organisation] raise is dependent on how many 'rescues' they do. It is sad but that is the reality.

Furthermore, such change may not occur because there is no dialogue between some NGOs and the communities that are the focus of their campaigns, as another added:

Tell me, how would they [IJM] understand and appreciate the community standpoint of childhood and child labour when they refuse to acknowledge their existence? How would they appreciate the needs of the community when they do not go to talk to them? We go and seek to deal with the communities and the underlying socio-economic challenges that they face. If you look carefully, you can tell that our strategies and focus are different from theirs.

We draw on the theory of path dependence to examine this situation in the discussion and conclusion section that follows.

⁴² C Theron, 'Can Child Labour Be Justified?', Ardea International, 2 September 2016, <https://www.ardeainternational.com/thinking/can-child-labour-ever-justified-vic-manzano-clt-envirolaw>.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper is a contribution to critical scholarship on the ethical and political issues associated with the creation and dissemination of unsettling images and videos for child-trafficking and human trafficking abolitionist campaigns. Its key argument is that the anti-trafficking sector's efforts to remedy the problems associated with such campaigns have been largely rhetorical or superficial. Sensationalism and spectacles of victimhood, abjection, pain, and suffering still dominate anti-trafficking campaigns, documentary films, and other depictions. The paper's explanation for the persistence of these unethical strategies is that some anti-trafficking actors are trapped by their rhetoric and history, per the theory of path dependence. This theory is used by sociologists, economists, and political scientists to explain how existing practices, systems, and ideas can create inertia after so much has been invested in them.⁴³

Its departure point is that history and precedence (choices, ideas, practices, and behaviours) matter immensely and can create heavy disincentives for change.⁴⁴ The functioning of societies and institutions is such that initial choices and events set into motion specific trajectories which can become difficult to change in time for reasons such as cost, time, rules, credibility, and other factors. Consequently, they are maintained and even defended when they are shown to be flawed.⁴⁵ In this case, the IJM and other anti-trafficking organisations have carved for themselves the power and authority to determine what counts as valid knowledge on children's mobility, work, and socialisation on the islands. They have established a three-component narrative of helpless child trafficking victims, evil traffickers or perpetrators in their own communities, and heroic outsiders such as anti-trafficking NGOs.

Their stories of child abuse, trafficking, and enslavement in this area have attained international recognition as unassailable 'truths' and currently dominate the mental frames through which children's work on the lake is presented and understood. Path dependence analysis suggests that such power and privilege can equally constrain. Deviation from these messages, which have so far been presented as sacrosanct, can appear as an acknowledgement of fault. Acceptance of positions such as those from the islanders that have been omitted, concealed, or invalidated for so long can also appear as a threat to credibility, authenticity,

⁴³ C Pollitt and G Bouckaert, *Public Management Reform: A comparative analysis – Into the age of austerity*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

⁴⁴ A W Brian, 'Competing Technologies, Increasing Returns, and Lock-In by Historical Events', *The Economic Journal*, vol. 99, issue 394, 1989, pp. 116–131, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2234208>.

⁴⁵ I Greener 'The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies', *Politics*, vol. 25, issue 1, 2005, pp. 62–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2005.00230.x>.

and consistency. Consequently, the white man with the camera, the AHTU and other anti-trafficking campaigners have become resistant to change. The inertia is also connected to the hugely unequal power differentials between the marginalised islanders and actors such as the IJM (a politically well-connected international organisation worth over USD 60,000,000), the AHTU (a state security apparatus), and global media organisations such as the BBC or CNN with reputations at stake.

Change has become difficult because for the IJM and other actors, the raids also provide videos, images and other resources through which they claim expertise and power of social construction over the realities of children's work on the islands. Moving away from raids and sensationalism and instead pursuing child rights goals through community engagement risks humanising the islanders who have long been caricatured as irredeemable villains in the campaigns. It will shatter the illusion created by the simplistic tales of good NGO saviours versus evil islanders and potentially dry funding streams as our NGO interviewees intimated. Hence, despite the widespread awareness within the anti-trafficking sector that raids, and controversial campaigns flagrantly violate the rights of entire communities, a move away from these practices does not seem likely; especially so because there is currently no realistic prospect for sanctions against the rights violations associated with the raids given the aforementioned political, social and economic power imbalances surrounding the practice.

Continuation of the status quo also rests with audiences or consumers of the campaigns and documentary films. Research shows that prolonged exposure to sensational, melodramatic, or unsettling visual materials can numb audiences to less dramatic representations.⁴⁶ Comparatively 'anodyne' images such as those proposed by the islanders may therefore not find sufficiently fertile sympathetic grounds. To agree with Kennedy, the continued domination of 'hard-hitting' images in humanitarian campaigns signifies the paradox that audiences have also come to expect representations that strip supposed child victims and their communities of all social, political, and cultural significance and present them in a state of 'bare life', as Agamben puts it.⁴⁷ The impetus or moral inclination to support others no longer hinges on solidarity and dignity but the degree to which they are presented and accepted as 'suitable victims' or worthy objects of pity, victimisation, and degradation.

The foregoing is all the more problematic against the backdrop that anti-trafficking interventions and charity appeals are rarely 'solutions'. The islanders' accounts show that anti-trafficking and humanitarian modalities are mostly reactions to manifestations of more profound social, economic, and other structural problems.

⁴⁶ S Sontag, *On Photography*, RosettaBooks, New York, 2005.

⁴⁷ G Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998; Kennedy.

A shift from sensationalism, melodrama, and raids towards more informed conversations on the social, educational, economic, and other underlying drivers of children's insecurities is therefore urgently needed. This includes the need for further research that will help to better understand how adults and children alike in communities such as those on the Lake Volta understand harm, exploitation, child development, family relationships, freedom, and unfreedom.

To conclude, we do not argue that the use of images and videos is in and of itself problematic. Used sensitively and with the full consent and involvement of those who are featured, they can be a good means of advocating for the rights of disenfranchised persons and communities. However, we reject the use of visuals acquired through anti-trafficking raids given the serious ethical questions and outright human rights violations surrounding the acquisition and use of such materials.

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